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Is Marketing Messing with Your Clients' Heads? Brands, Identity, and Clinical Practice

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**Is Marketing Messing with Your Clients' Heads?
Brands, Identity, and Clinical Practice**
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University - University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study.

This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

This narrative review of the literature explores current understanding of whether and how consumer brands affect clients' constructs of self and therefore clinical mental health practice. The relevance of this question stems from the growing body of academic business and marketing literature dedicated to engineering brands into consumers' constructs of self, and from the marketing infrastructure dedicated to engineering brands suitable for self-construction. From a social constructionist perspective, the question is additionally relevant considering how environmental factors related to constructing the self ultimately affect mental health. Systematic searches of four databases fail to find any articles addressing potential practice implications of building brands into construct of self. Even so, the narrative review and discussion identify gaps in clinical understanding, the implications of leaving those gaps unexplored, and future directions for research that might close those gaps.

Keywords: clinical mental health practice, consumer brands, marketing, mental illness, self-concept, social construct

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Is Marketing Messing with Your Clients' Heads?

Brands, Identity, and Clinical Practice

Clinical social workers, as well as other mental health practitioners, know to consider the social environment when assessing a client's wellbeing. Many also have a sense that consumer brands, from the Nike swoosh on their shoes to the hood ornament on their cars, loom large in that environment. Also front-of-mind when treating clients are matters of identity, personality, and other concerns centered on the self and its construction. A systems-theory approach intensifies focus on environmental influences on the self.

But, do clinicians consider how brands might factor into a client's construct of self?

Few clinicians would be surprised to learn that construct of self has received pages and pages of coverage in academic journals. Possibly surprising might be how much of that coverage appears, not in clinical social work, psychology, or other mental health literature, but in journals devoted to branding, marketing, and business. What is more, the particular focus of this academic marketing research is on building consumer brands into consumers' constructs of self.

The marketing literature's focus on brands and self raises several questions for clinicians, starting with the plausibility of the premise. How would that work, building brands into construct of self? What does it mean to say that brands are part of the self? Once conceptualized, would it make a difference, one way or the other? What might it mean, if anything, when clients have an Apple Computer logo tattooed on their bicep or say they come from a "Chevy family?"

What might a clinician looking for answers find in clinical mental health journals?

Answering all but the last question requires a workable conceptualization of the self, an appreciation of marketing as social science, and an awareness of brands both as psychological constructs and as purposefully constructed. Also significant is how the process of constructing the self (narratively, socially, dynamically, and culturally) permits brands' participation in each

aspect of that process. Finally, there are the ways that maladaptive construction of the self affect mental health and therefore clinical practice.

Social constructionism's conceptualization of the self illuminates how brands might build themselves into construct of self. Social constructionism—which sees the self, as with other phenomena, as a social construction, the product of discourse in relation to others (Béres, 2002; Besley, 2002; Carr, 1998; Gergen, 2011; McVittle & McKinlay, 2017; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012; Saleebey, 1994; Stillman, 2016; Swann & Bosson, 2010; Wallis et al., 2011)—inspires much of the marketing research into brands and the self. Mental health's and marketing's shared theoretical base makes sense considering that, as an academic subject, marketing is a social science, drawing from the same intellectual well as social work, psychology, and sociology. As a result, concepts jump easily from one discipline to the other. Brands, for example, are “multidimensional constructs” (Moore & Reid, 2008). They are significant because they function as much more than identifiers (Estrela, Pereira, & Ventura, 2014; Kolb, 2008; McLaughlin, 2012). Because a brand is a symbol, it also can be *symbolic*, which means it can signify meaning (Belk, 1988; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Grubb, 1967; McCracken, 1988; Moore & Reid, 2008; Razmus, Jaroszynska, & Palega, 2017; Schembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010). Imbuing brands with meaning and then maximizing their social impact is an acute focus both of scholarly marketing research and of the brand strategy consulting firms that apply the academy's findings to the marketplace.

A brand's ability to contain and convey symbolic meaning makes it well-suited for participating in the narrative, social, dynamic, and cultural processes of constructing the self. As a social construction, the self results from a discursive process that organizes around a coherent personal narrative (Besley, 2002; Carr, 1998; Gergen, 2011; McVittle & McKinlay, 2017; Saleebey, 1994; Stillman, 2016; Swann & Bosson, 2010; Wallis, Burns, & Capdevila, 2011).

Reflecting this view, marketing research explores how meaning transfers to and from brands (Belk, 1988, 1989; Cooper, Schembri, & Miller, 2010; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Estrela et al., 2014; Fournier, 1998; Grubb, 1967; Hershey & Branch, 2011; McCracken, 1987; O'Reilly, 2005; Schembri et al., 2010; Twitchell, 1996, 1999, 2004). The resulting focus is on brand story (Blaszkiewicz, 2017; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Hope, 2015; Huang, 2010; Jiwa, n.d., 2014a, 2014b; Lin & Chen, 2015; Sarkar, Sarkar, & Ponnamp, 2015; Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008), brand identity (Belk, 1988; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Estrela et al., 2014; Grubb, 1967; Harris, Gordon, Mackintosh, & Hastings, 2015; John, 1999; O'Reilly, 2005; Schembri et al., 2010; Ward, 1974), and on the self-actualizing effects of brand consumption (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Cooper et al., 2010; Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2006; O'Reilly, 2005; Schembri et al., 2010; Ward, 1974).

Marketing research addresses the social process of construction (Leitch & Motion; 2007; John, 1999; Rodhain & Aurier, 2016; Schembri et al., 2010) by thinking in terms of brand personality (D. Aaker, 1996; J. Aaker, 1997; Ahuvia, 2005; Angle & Forehand, 2016; Fournier, 1998; Razmus et al., 2017; Sarkar et al., 2015; Schembri et al., 2010) and brand relationship (Angle & Forehand, 2016; Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Fournier, 1998; Razmus et al., 2017; Sarkar et al., 2015). Construction of the self, meanwhile, is dynamic, premised on the malleability of self (Gergen, 2011; Matsumoto, 2009; McVittle & McKinlay, 2017; Oyserman et al., 2012; VandenBos, 2015) that results in multiple (James, 1890) and often aspirational selves (Jung, 1979; Matsumoto, 2009; Swann & Bosson, 2010; VandenBos, 2015). Marketing research embraces this dynamism, aiming to provide “brand repositories” that serve multiple selves with a range (Estrela et al., 2014; Fournier; 1998) of sometimes aspirational (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Sarkar et al., 2015; Shankar, Cherrier, & Canniford, 2006) meanings. Finally, social constructionists look to the broader culture for the symbolic meanings out of which individuals

construct their narratives (Béres, 2002; Besley, 2002; Carr, 1998; Gergen, 2011; Levy, 2006/2007; Oyserman et al., 2012; Saleebey, 1994; Stillman, 2016; Swann & Bosson, 2010; Wallis et al., 2011). For their part, marketing researchers think in terms of consumer socialization (Burman et al., 2017; Carnevale, Luna, & Lerman, 2017; Estrela et al., 2014; Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Harris et al., 2015; Nairn, Griffin, & Gaya., 2008; Rodhain & Aurier, 2016), effected within a consumer culture (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Holt, 2002; McCracken, 1986; Moschis, Moore, & Stanley, 1984; O'Reilly, 2005; Pagla & Brennan, 2014). The goal for marketers, then, is to embed brands (Bhatnagar & Wan, 2011; Cooper et al., 2010; Schembri et al., 2010; Vashisht & Pillai, 2017) aimed at transferring meanings to culture.

The influence of self suggests that any part of its construct might affect mental health and overall wellbeing. Even so, marketing research's belief that brands can and do insert themselves into consumers' constructs of self need not bode ill for clinicians. Much of the marketing research, in fact, frames brands as beneficial cultural resources (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986; Shankar et al., 2006). But, as with any potentially adaptive process, there is the potential of maladaptation (Tilsen & Nylund, 2016). Marketing researchers themselves acknowledge the potential of brands to disorder construction of self (Harris et al., 2015; Holt, 2002; Croghan et al., 2006; McCracken, 1986; Razmus et al., 2017; Rodhain & Aurier 2016; Shankar et al., 2006).

Backgrounded with this information, a clinician might find him- or herself obliged to explore what the mental health literature says about brands and their possible impact on clinical practice. This narrative review of the literature gives clinicians an idea of what they might find.

The Socially Constructed Self

Social constructionism offers a helpful framework for talking about the self. It organizes and resolves disparate and sometimes-competing insights from more than 125 years of

scholarship. It reflects social work's emphasis on person-in-environment. It illuminates the aspects of the self that have attracted the attention of marketers and brand strategists. And, it provides context for understanding how an environmental factor such as a consumer brand might affect the person.

Context and clarification turn out to be necessary when using a term so broad and flexible it prompted one scholar to call it, "richly polysemic" (Gergen, 2011). The possible meanings of *the self* expand and contract (Oyserman et al., 2012). At its most expansive, the self conceptualizes the individual in his or her totality, encompassing every physical process, every mental process, every stage of development, and every other characteristic (Matsumoto, 2009; VandenBos, 2015). Attempts to narrow the definition generate competing views, with influential writers either stressing specific aspects of the self or defining it in precise-but-conflicting terms (Matsumoto, 2009). The self sometimes appears as a synonym of ego (Matsumoto, 2009; VandenBos, 2015), other times as its product (Rogers, 1947). Some think of the self as a component of personality (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Others equate the two (Jung, 1979).

Paving the way for a brand-accessible, social constructionist conceptualization of the self, William James (1890) established two essential axioms. First, the self is a construct of the "I" (traits inherent to the individual) and the "me" (aspects absorbed from the social environment). Also, the "me" itself is constructed of constituent parts, each adapted to a changing social environment. As a result, says James (1890), "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him" (p. 294). An additional observation—"Between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine the line is difficult to draw" (James, 1890, p. 291)—would, a century later, inspire a new wave of marketing scholarship.

Other influential thinkers include Adler, who saw the self as a tool for seeking fulfillment (VandenBos, 2015), Rogers, who suggested that experience, learning, and social pressure shapes perception of the self (Matsumoto, 2009), and Jung, who asserted that the self develops over one's lifespan, as part of a gradual process of individuation (VandenBos, 2015). One more aspect of constructing the self with implications both for marketers and mental health practitioners is that the process is largely unconscious (James, 1890; Jung, 1979). The cultural and social processes of constructing the self in particular, noted Rogers, operate below consciousness (Matsumoto, 2009). Intuitive-experiential system theories of self also look to processes of construction that operate outside of awareness (Swann & Bosson, 2010).

A social constructionist framework incorporates, grounds, and builds upon many of these ideas, starting with its premise that knowledge is the product of social interaction (Gergen, 2011; Matsumoto, 2009; McLeod, 1997; VandenBos, 2015). As with other aspects of knowledge, the self is a social construction. Throughout its development, environmental influences guide the mental processes of constructing the self (Matsumoto, 2009; VandenBos, 2015). Because they “work at the at the intersection of self and social environment” (Saleebey, 1994, p. 357), clinical social workers also acknowledge the social construction of self and meaning (Besley, 2002).

Within a social constructionist framework, the self is constructed *narratively*; stories let individuals create meaning and locate themselves in the socially constructed world (Béres, 2002; Carr, 1998; McVittle & McKinlay, 2017; Saleebey, 1994; Stillman, 2016; Swann & Bosson, 2010; Wallis et al., 2011). Events take on meaning as we weave them into the plots of our narratives (Carr, 1998; Stillman, 2016). The self is constructed *socially* (Matsumoto, 2009; McLeod, 1997; McVittle & McKinlay, 2017; Oyserman et al., 2012; VandenBos, 2015) as telling narratives and hearing those of others become building blocks for construct of self (Swann & Bosson, 2010). The self is constructed *dynamically*, not only refashioning itself to

meet the social needs of the moment (Gergen, 2011; McVittle & McKinlay, 2017), but also developing over time (Jung, 1979; Matsumoto, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2012; VandenBos, 2015). The self is constructed *culturally* (Matsumoto, 2009; McLeod, 1997; VandenBos, 2015), with culture presenting the raw meanings and imposing its plots on individual narratives (Saleebey, 1994).

A Clinician's Guide to Marketing and Brands

Several aspects of marketing illuminate how insights from the business literature could be relevant to clinical practice. Clinicians delving into the business literature might find themselves more up to speed than they anticipate, thanks to the striking parallels between marketing and clinical social work. For one thing, as studied at universities around the world, marketing is a social science. Shared sociological and psychological concepts jump easily from one discipline to the other. The fit is so natural that it has led to the evolution of a distinct discipline, marketing psychology. Brands and brand strategy become even less alien with the realization that the consumer brand, as the object of academic rigor, functions as a sophisticated psychological construct.

Marketing is a Social Science

As with other social sciences, marketing's evidence-base and best-practices are incubated in the academy, then published in academic journals. A clinician thumbing through these journals would find familiar conceptualizations, theories, and frameworks. Over the years, for example, the *Journal of Consumer Research* has featured Fournier's (1998) consumer-brand relationship theory, Holt's (2002) dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding, John's (1999) conceptual framework for consumer socialization, and Belk's (1988) extension of William James' Empirical self, the extended self theory. The *European Journal of Marketing*, meanwhile, offers "a psychosocial model of trust in brands" (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007), a

“Piagetian developmental cognitive psychology model” to explain children’s use of brand symbolism (Nairn et al., 2008), and a “Foucauldian interpretation [of] consumer empowerment” (Shankar et al., 2006).

Academic marketing departments are nearly as common in universities throughout the world as they are in corporate headquarters. In the United States, at least 24 states host at least one Ph.D. in marketing program; nearly every state and US territory hosts at least one Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) in marketing program (Marketing & Advertising, 2017). While DBA’s more nearly resemble professional degrees, marketing Ph.D. programs emphasize higher education. The point, generally, is to graduate academicians that can contribute to the body of marketing research, theory, and analysis. The research-intensive core curricula typically include behavioral marketing, buying behavior, and cognitive and social psychology.

Marketing, Psychology, and *Marketing Psychology*

Shared concerns and interchangeable conceptualizations blur the line between marketing and psychology. In 2002, for example, the Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to *psychologist* Daniel Kahneman (Altman, 2002). Psychological concepts figure so prominently in texts such as *Marketing Management* (Kotler & Keller, 2015) and, especially, *Identity-Based Brand Management* (Burmman et al., 2017), that social work students might mistake whole sections for their human behavior in the social environment textbook.

Functioning less like a hybrid of two disciplines, marketing psychology neither operationalizes psychology for marketing nor applies psychology to marketing. Although the University of Pennsylvania is among the first to offer a joint doctoral degree in marketing and psychology, marketing Ph.D. programs at schools such as Yale, Harvard, MIT, and Stanford offer behavioral, psychology-based marketing tracks. Overseas, schools such as Regents University and the University of Sussex offer master’s degrees in marketing psychology. In

Holland, one program offers to make “you an expert in the field of the psychological determinants of economic and consumer decision making” (Leiden University, n.d.) while another “studies the psychological mechanisms that underlie consumption and other economic behaviors” (Tilburg University, 2016).

A growing number of specialized journals publish articles that grapple with constructs of self, identity, psychometrics, relationship, self-esteem, socialization, and other issues familiar to clinicians. Adding to the long-established peer-reviewed *Psychology and Marketing* (publishing since 1984) and the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (since 1992), are more recently founded publications such as the *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, the *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, the *Journal of Economic Psychology*, the *Journal of Economics and Behavioral Studies*, and the *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* (formerly the *Journal of Socio-Economics*) (Behavioral Economics Group, n.d.).

Conceptualizing *Brand*

As “multidimensional constructs” (Moore & Reid, 2008), there are several aspects of consumer brands that reveal their potential to influence mental health practice. Meanwhile, the infrastructure of corporate marketing departments, advertising agencies, and brand strategy consultancies applies findings from academic marketing literature, tweaking brands’ psychological dimensions and propagating them into the social environment.

A very brief history of consumer brands. Consumer brands originated about the same time (Kolb, 2008; Moore & Reid, 2008) as did the conceptualization of the self. A quick look at what brands were at their inception—tracing their three-era developmental process of *logos*, *eros*, and *mythos* (Lusensky, 2014)—helps to explain what they are now (McLaughlin, 2012).

Brand as identifier. The general store of more than a century ago was barren of brands, stocked instead with generic products in plain wooden barrels and burlap sacks. The rise of

packaged goods created both a means and a need for the introduction of non-generic logotypes to serve as identifying markers (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Kolb, 2008; McLaughlin, 2012; Moore & Reid, 2008). Taking their name from the designs burned into the rumps of free-roaming cattle (McLaughlin, 2012), these logotypes quickly became known as brands. At first, attention was on the utility of the product, not on the brand affixed to it. Even so, even in the beginning, affixing a brand to an otherwise generic product seemed to imply quality and motivate consumer behavior (Moore & Reid 2008). Soon, implicit messages of quality became explicit (McLaughlin, 2012), transcending brands' original function as graphical representations (Estrela et al., 2014) and propelling them to ever-greater complexity (Moore & Reid, 2008).

Brand as signifier. Modern brands do not just identify products; they also can signify meaning. Brands, even at their most fundamental, are symbols. And, because a brand is a symbol, it can *symbolize*. Based on their ability to symbolize a product's value, brands came to signify value greater than, and therefore independent of, a product's utility. As a result, it is not a product's utility, but its brand's symbolic meaning that motivates consumer behavior (Belk, 1988; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Grubb, 1967; McCracken, 1988; Moore & Reid, 2008; Schembri et al., 2010). As a collection of unique meanings (Aaker, 1997; Razmus et al., 2017), brands let consumers use their objects as symbols of something else (Schembri et al., 2010). Freighted with messages that might relate to personality, power, status, values, and/or virtues (Moore & Reid, 2008), the ultimate value of brands lies in their ability to give consumers symbolic resources (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Schembri et al., 2010) for communicating meaning about themselves (Grubb, 1967).

Propagators of brands. A brand's symbolic value is maximized, then disseminated into public consciousness through a process called branding. As a major topic of study since the 1970s (Moore & Reid, 2008), branding has generated a raft of academic research, peer-reviewed

articles, trade periodical coverage, business books, and consulting firms. Although it falls under the broad category of marketing—and no matter how often the terms appear interchangeably—branding is distinctly different from marketing (Heaton, 2017; Marion, 2016). As defined by *The Brand Journal*, “branding is the process of *giving a meaning* to specific products by creating and shaping a brand in consumers’ minds [emphasis added]” (Marion, 2016). The goal is to endow products and services with the power of a brand (Kotler & Keller, 2015) by expanding its conceptual dimensions (Aaker, 1998). Often, the process of giving meaning follows a scientific, engineering model (Holt, 2002).

The advanced-degree programs at business school marketing departments reflect this distinction, often offering specialized tracks that separate out branding from marketing’s other functions. Some schools offer stand-alone degrees, specifically in branding (City College of New York, 2017; University of Illinois, n.d.; University of Southern California, n.d.). This specialization propels brand-specific academic research and feeds a rich knowledge base. From the first brand-centered journal article in 1942, academic interest in branding exploded in the 1970s (Moore & Reid, 2008). Today, branding is the exclusive focus of peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Brand Management*, the *Journal of Brand Strategy*, the *Journal of Product & Brand Management*. Recent representative articles include “Brand Linguistics: A Theory-Driven Framework” (Carnevale et al., 2017), “Consumers’ Self-Congruence with a “Liked” Brand: Cognitive Network Influence and Brand Outcomes” (Wallace, Buil, & Leslie, 2017), “Online Brand Community: Through the Eyes of Self-Determination Theory” (James & Dana, 2016), and “The Psychology of Co-Branding Alliances” (Dahlstrom & Nygaard, 2016). Trade periodicals serving branding professionals include *Brand Republic*, *Brand Strategy*, the *Branding Journal*, and *Superbrands*. Meanwhile, the hundreds of trade and professional books

include *Brand Seduction* (Weber, 2016), *Brand Psychology* (Gabay, 2016), and *Brand Meaning* (Batey, 2016).

Ultimately, these psychological concepts become grist for thousands of corporate brand managers and hundreds of branding strategy consulting firms. A recent blog entry from San Francisco's brand strategy agency Emotive Brand, for example, tells prospective customers that "studies prove [that people] are seeking to create meaning from what they do" (Lloyd, 2016). Boston-based consultancy Semiovox's sales pitch to its clients, meanwhile, speaks in a language familiar to clinicians:

Because it is only possible to make and interpret meaning via those codes (norms, and the verbal and visual forms by which the norms are communicated) specific to certain cultures and market categories ... consumers discover (and create) meaning in brands in ways that are shaped by deep-rooted cultural and market category codes. (Why Use Semiotics, n.d.)

Deploying symbolism and transferring meaning to and from brands is also on the minds of consultancy The Blake Project. In a recent blog entry, it urges brand managers to "shift from a vocabulary of words to a vocabulary of images [because] brands should understand how this new visual language creates meaning in the minds of consumers" (Wren, 2017). Peopledesign, meanwhile, offers to craft "future-proof brands [that] reflect a specific human need to a depth that products ... cannot" (Brand meaning, n.d.). Emotive Brand captures the prevailing belief among brand strategists, saying, "a brand has greater impact when it has a strong emotional connection to individual people – when it has meaning" (Philosophy, n.d.). Overseas, the home page of London's Big Green Door features one, lone statement: "We specialize in creating meaning for the world's leading consumer brands" (Big Green Door, n.d.). From its offices in Berlin, Copenhagen, and Vienna, LHBS, joins the international effort to "define brands that meet

human needs, values and behaviors and have real meaning for their audiences” (LHBS - Brand & Business Consultancy, n.d.).

Working definition: “Brand.” The terms *brand* is widely used but inconsistently understood (McLaughlin, 2012), even among marketing professionals (Marion, 2016). As with the term “the self,” the definitions and connotations of brand expand and contract. They are used sometimes synonymously with similar terms, sometimes to make a distinction. Clarification and context are especially helpful for clinicians wishing for a fuller understanding of brand as construct.

The most helpful way to understand how a brand might function within a social constructionist framework is as *a story you buy to tell a story about yourself*. As cultural critic Twitchell (2004) observes, brands fulfill human yearning to be sociable, share feelings, tell stories, and therefore “are best understood as a storytelling process” (p. 18). Other definitions include “ideas, perceptions, promises” (Brand meaning, n.d.), “meaning, value, and preference in one’s mind” (Boiter, n.d.), or as “exist[ing] only in someone’s mind” (McLaughlin, 2012). Tracking brand’s genesis from identifier to signifier, Kolb (2008), offers:

A brand is the unique, *ownable identity* of a business, enterprise, company, or undertaking. It ... conveys what the enterprise stands for, its products and services, and ultimately its role and significance for the customer, consumer, user, or perceiver in its respective *society, culture, or civilization*. Increasingly, a brand is any *carefully articulated identity* [emphases added]. (p. 194)

Each of these definitions helps demonstrate how brand, as with the self, is a social construction.

The Commercially Constructed Self

Decades of marketing scholarship focusing on brand, informed by a century of mental health scholarship focusing on the self, leads marketing researchers to an insight. A social

construction fraught with symbolic meaning (brand) should snap easily into a social construction comprised of narrative (the self). That makes it possible for consumers to use brands in their constructs of self (Cooper et al., 2010; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Schembri et al., 2010).

This insight arguably tracks to one of psychology's first observations about the self, appearing more than a century ago in *The Principles of Psychology*. "In its widest possible sense," wrote William James (1890),

a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down. (James, 1890, p. 291)

James notwithstanding, Viennese-trained psychoanalyst-turned-market-researcher Ernest Dichter (1960) later maintained that "modern psychology has overlooked to a very large extent the real expressive powers that objects have. Objects have a soul [and] individuals project themselves into products. In buying a car, they actually buy an extension of their own personality. When they are 'loyal' to a commercial brand, they are loyal to themselves" (p. 86). To that end, Dichter used his training to head the Institute for Motivational Research (Pace, 1991) and, later, to found marketing consultancy Ernest Dichter Associates International (Berger, 2017).

James' "widest possible sense" of the self—as well as additional insights from psychology, psychoanalytic theory, feminist studies, anthropology, and sociology—inspired business professor Richard Belk (1988) a century later to introduce his theory of the extended self. "That we are what we have," writes Belk (1988), "is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior" (p. 160). Belk's influential theory, says Ahuvia (2005), launched a wave of marketing research demonstrating the links between identity and consumption, between

possessions and the self, and between the self and consumer brand choice. If the extended self can incorporate possessions, and the value of a brand's symbolic meaning is separate from the possession it adorns, it goes to follow that those symbolic meanings can be incorporated into the extended self (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1989; Razmus et al., 2017; Rodhain & Aurier, 2016). Belk (1988) states that the most significant implication of the extended self is its role generating meaning in life. Belk's influential theory serves as a pivot point between James' notion of the Empirical self and a wave of marketing research into brands and how they impact self-concept and identity construction (Ahuvia, 2005; Razmus et al., 2017). Having identified "a phenomenon worthy of investigation," for example, Schembri, Merrilees, and Kristiansen (2010) write in a *Psychology and Marketing* article that they seek "to identify and describe how consumers use brands to construct their self" (p. 623). Sharing a clinician's interest in the unconscious, marketing researchers look at how symbolic meaning can be nonconscious (Hershey & Branch, 2011), unknowing or unintentional (Belk, 1988), unencumbered by standards of scientific truth (Jensen, 1999), and beyond rational decision making (Schembri et al., 2010).

That consumers might use brands in their constructs of self becomes more plausible given that the self is constructed narratively, socially, dynamically, and culturally. Aspects of construction accommodate aspects of brand; brand as story and conveyor of symbolic meaning fits with the narrative processes of construction of the self; marketers' conceptualization of brand relationships and brand personality reflects the social aspects of self; a ready repository of brands, each with an established storyline and ready-made symbolic meaning, serves the dynamic nature of construction, and; efforts to embed brands in the social environment to effect consumer socialization seek to harness the cultural dimensions of construct of self.

Narrative Construction and Brand Stories

For a clinician of a social constructionist bent, the medium for constructing the self is narrative. A shared perspective has led marketing researchers to explore ways for brands to participate in this narrative process of construction, focusing on story-telling, symbolic meaning, identity expression, and self-actualization via brand-consumption.

Clinical context: Articulating the self. “To be,” says philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), “means to communicate” (p. 281, as cited in Gergen, 2011, p.14). Significant modes of communication include language and other symbol systems. Each, within the intersubjectivity of a social constructionist framework, serves as a catalyst in the process of constructing the self; language, by providing a means for articulating the self and identity (Besley, 2002) and symbol systems, by providing a means for representing and therefore constituting experience (Herman, 2012). “Human beings,” says social work professor Dennis Saleebey (1994), “can only build themselves into the world by creating meaning, by fashioning out of symbols a sense of what the world is all about” (p. 351). These catalysts effect full potency when conveyed within a narrative structure. Guided by a narrative fore-structure, conception of self emerges from one's narrative of self (Gergen, 2011). Narrative imbues meaning (Béres, 2002; Besley, 2002; Herman, 2012; Leitch & Motion, 2007) and constitutes the self by weaving experience into the plots of individuals’ stories (Carr, 1998; Stillman, 2016). Because we find or impart meaning by telling stories and weaving narratives (Saleebey, 1994), narrative world-making reflects and is reflective of the mind (Warhol, 2012). As Spence (1982) explains,

Part of my sense of self depends on my being able to go backward and forward in time and weave a story about who I am, how I got that way, and where I am going, a story that is continuously nourishing and self-sustaining. (p. 458, as cited in McLeod, 1997, p. 95)

How you tell your story very much influences the process of constructing of the self (Besley, 2002; Carr, 1998; McVittle & McKinlay, 2017; Swann & Bosson, 2010; Wallis et al., 2011).

Marketing applications: “Anthropomorphic actors.” A significant body of marketing scholarship centers on narrative’s role in structuring one’s sense of identity (Ahuvia, 2005; Cooper et al., 2010; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman 2005; Fournier 1998; Hershey & Branch, 2011; Schembri et al., 2010). The increasing attention paid to conceptualization of self as narrative (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) makes it one of the biggest developments in consumer research of the last several decades (Ahuvia, 2005). Sounding very much like social constructionists, marketing professors Schembri and colleagues (2010) note that “the relationship between consumers’ interpretation of everyday life and social narratives forms their identities” (p. 625). Marketing professor Jennifer Escalas (2004), meanwhile, cites Bruner as she explores how brands become meaningful for consumers. “One thought process that may create a link between a brand and a consumer’s self-concept,” she writes, is “the construction of narratives or stories” (Escalas, 2004, p. 168). Other marketing research takes inspiration from Burke’s *Lexicon Rhetoricae* (Hershey & Branch, 2011), Ricoeur’s narrative identity theory (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), Foucault’s constructs of disciplinary power (Shankar et al., 2006), and symbolic interactionism as it relates to objects as structuring elements in self-perception (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016).

Articles in journals such as *Psychology and Marketing* and the *International Journal of Advertising* can start to sound strikingly similar to those in the mental health literature, echoing the words of the influential social work scholars cited above. “Narratives,” writes Schembri and colleagues, “make our experience meaningful and may be a basic way in which consumers structure and make sense of their lives ... This story enables consumers to make sense of who they are” (p. 624). Noting that “we make sense of ourselves and our lives by the stories we can

(or cannot) tell,” marketing professors Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) hope to assist “consumers searching for identity through consumption [by] understand[ing] the concept and dynamics of self, the symbolic meaning of goods, and the role played by brands” (p. 131). Other research is premised on the “development of a psychosocial model of trust in brands by drawing on both social theory and on the psychology of human relationships” (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007, p. 988). Sharing an interest in social theory and psychology, marketing professors Cooper, Schembri, and Miller (2010) write,

Stories encapsulate and communicate traditions, values, and cultural beliefs. [Because] stories and storytelling [have] assist[ed] individuals throughout the ages in understanding their experience and their social world (p. 557) ... the brand’s story is the key to creating a valuable brand identity and integral to developing an iconic brand. (p. 564)

Brand stories. Marketers capture the relationship of narrative and brand with the phrase “brand story.” As a result of its increasing prominence (Hope, 2015), “brand story has become the new black of marketing” (Jiwa, 2014b). Incompletely understood by many marketers (Cronin, 2016), brand story’s varied and ambiguous usage seems to distill out the abstract, psychological dimensions of brand. Pitching their customers, brand strategists variably describe “brand story [as] a cohesive narrative [encompassing] facts and feelings” (Hope, 2015), “the narrative behind the purpose” (Blazskiewicz, 2017), “more than content and a narrative” (Jiwa, n.d.), and “a collection of many stories” (Reimagine PR, n.d.). It aims to encapsulate a brand’s who, what, why, history, and future (Blazskiewicz, 2017; Reimagine PR, n.d.). A study published in the *European Journal of Marketing*, meanwhile, “defines a brand story as a means of communicating the meanings of products and brands to customers. Elements such as the origination, innovation and development, benefits and values and visions can all be communicated through a brand story” (Lin & Chen, 2015, p. 693). Other marketing researchers

sometimes focus on stories told *with* a brand (Lin & Chen, 2015) and other times focus on stories told *about* a brand (Huang, 2010; Sarkar et al., 2015).

As often, the phrase refers, not to an actual story with a protagonist, antagonist, and a beginning, middle, and end, but to the encapsulation of these elements into a narrative archetype. A “textual analysis” of the *James Bond* films, for example, explores how Bond—by using the brand narratives of Bollinger (conjuring the archetype of lover and seducer), Aston Martin (the hero archetype), and Jaguar (outlaw archetype) to construct his social reality—provides a model for filmgoers’ own consumption of brands (Cooper et al., 2010). Related studies include investigations of persona-focused brand stories (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010) and of the role brands serve as “anthropomorphic actors” in consumers’ stories of self (Woodside et al., 2008).

Whatever the focus or approach, marketing’s orientation to brand story reveals the field’s interest in the links between narrative, brand, and the self.

Identity expression and symbolic resources. It is the symbolic dimensions of brands that enable brand stories to serve as archetypes or anthropomorphic actors in personal narratives. These capacities drive marketers’ decades-long search for a theory of how *symbolic* value drives consumer behavior (Grubb, 1967). As a symbol, remember, the trade name and logotype represented by the brand gains the ability to contain and convey symbolic meaning (Belk, 1988, 1989; Cooper et al., 2010; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Estrela et al., 2014; Fournier, 1998; Grubb, 1967; Hershey & Branch, 2011; O’Reilly, 2005; McCracken, 1987; Schembri et al., 2010; Twitchell, 1996, 1999, 2004). These symbolic meanings let consumers, based on the brands they consume, communicate meaning about themselves (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Grubb, 1967; Schembri et al., 2010; O’Reilly, 2005). As a result, brands can serve as expressions (Belk, 1988; Harris et al., 2015; O’Reilly, 2005; Ward, 1974), components (Estrela et al., 2014),

or shapers (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Estrela et al., 2014; John, 1999; O'Reilly, 2005) of identity.

Again, the marketing research echoes social work professor Saleebey (1994), this time related to how humans use symbols to create meaning and make sense of the world.

“Advertising,” note marketing professors Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), “can also be used as a symbolic resource for the construction of narratives to give sense to our life history and personal situation” (p. 132).

Brand consumption. To be used in construct the self, symbolic meanings must be weaved into coherent identity narratives (Schembri et al., 2010); brand narratives must be transferred to personal narratives (Cooper et al., 2010; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Schembri et al., 2010; Shankar et al., 2006). The particular means for accomplishing this is the act of brand consumption (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Cooper et al., 2010; O'Reilly, 2005; Schembri et al., 2010). By consuming brands, consumers enact brand narratives in their everyday lives (Cooper et al., 2010), define themselves (Ahuvia, 2005; Ward, 1974), maintain their identities (Croghan et al., 2006), and, ultimately, build brands into their construct of self (Schembri et al., 2010). In this way, brand consumption becomes an act of personal development, achievement, and self-creation (Holt, 2002).

Social Construction and Brand Relationships

From a social constructionist perspective, the self, as with other phenomena, is a social construction. Marketing researchers who share that understanding of self think in terms of brand personalities and brand relationships as ways to participate in the social process of constructing the self.

Clinical context: “Performative” stories. The self, notes Saleebey (1994), does not grow from inner essence but from social bonds. Interpersonally and through wider influences

(Wallis et al., 2011), symbolic meanings cohere into personal narratives and construct the self through a process of discourse (Béres, 2002; Gergen, 2011). More than self-expression, our stories are *performative* (Gergen, 2011). We make meaning, shape our identities, and constitute our lives not just by telling our story, but by telling it *to ourselves* within a social context (Carr, 1998). Language plays a central role conveying our stories, its meaning shaded by human interaction (Gergen, 2011). We find meaning by locating our own narratives in the more sweeping narratives of our families, communities, and cultures (Béres, 2002; Carr, 1998; Saleebey, 1994; Stillman, 2016; Wallis et al., 2011). As Gergen (2011) notes,

It is through others' response to our gestures that we slowly begin to develop the capacities for mental symbolization; as others respond to our gestures, and we experience these responses within us, we are able to gain a sense of what the other's gesture symbolizes for him or her. (p. 13)

This symbolic interactionism changes the meaning of one's personal narrative and therefore construct of self (Swann & Bosson, 2010).

Because construction of the self is social, it also is relational. Because discourse of the self is performative, emotional expressions become relational performances (Gergen, 2011). Interactions in relationship with others are requisite for self (Swann & Bosson, 2010).

“Conscious experience,” says Gergen (2011), “is fundamentally relational; subject and object—or self and other—are unified within experience” (p. 13). The inclination to incorporate feedback from others into one's self (Oyserman et al., 2012) makes it possible for the relationships themselves to become part of the self (Swann & Bosson, 2010). “It would not be selves who come together to form relationships,” concludes Gergen (2011), “but relational process out of which the very idea of the psychological self could emerge” (p. 13).

Marketing applications: Brands as “social tools.” Brand meanings serve in the construction and maintenance of the social self (Aaker, 1996). Management professors Leitch and Motion (2007) bear that out, echoing the “discursive process” described above by social work professor Béres (2002) and demonstrating an understanding of the self as a social construction. Corporate brands, they write in the *Journal of Brand Management*, exist in “what Foucault and others might term the discursive space of meaning” (Leitch & Motion, 2007, p. 72). The *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, meanwhile, invokes symbolic interactionism to highlight how individuals use brands to structure self-perception, to shape social interactions, and to communicate to others the role they want to play (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016). Schembri and colleagues (2010) describe “brand consumption as a powerful social tool that consumers employ in their quest for self-identity [and] to communicate who they are” (p. 624).

Self-brand relationships. Reflecting how social environments are made up of relationships, marketing researchers focus on self-brand relationships (Angle & Forehand, 2016; Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Fournier, 1998; Razmus et al., 2017; Sarkar et al., 2015). Marketing researchers began in about 2005 to explore self-brand association (Razmus et al., 2017), seeking to understand how that association can prompt automatic preference for a brand and how the self links to an external entity (Angle & Forehand, 2016). Such a link rests partly on how well a brand’s identity expresses a significant aspect of self (Fournier, 1998). Leitch and Motion (2007), meanwhile, maintain that brand meanings are the “the outcomes of the relationships between brands and their various stakeholders” (p. 72).

As for the quality of those relationships, Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) laud the “ability of the brand to replace other less reliable relationships” (p. 134). Sarkar and colleagues (2015) believe that brands can create emotional alignment, “extending from [the] mere transactional nature of relationships to providing out-of-the-world experiences which surpass the

realm of mundane or ordinary experiences” (p. 272). Brands also can be needy, exacting protective feelings and dependency (Fournier, 1998). The many dimensions of self-brand associations, says Ahuvia (2005), mean that,

Consumer-brand relationships are at once broader than love, since love is only one type of relationship, and narrower than love, since they focus exclusively on brands.

Nonetheless, all of these constructs share a strong focus on the way people use consumption to maintain their sense of identity through time and define themselves in relationship to other people. (p. 171)

Brand personality. Recognizing that successful relationships involve the meshing of compatible personalities, marketing researchers work to strengthen self-brand relationships by focusing on brand personality (D. Aaker, 1996; J. Aaker, 1997; Ahuvia, 2005; Angle & Forehand, 2016; Fournier, 1998; Sarkar et al., 2015; Schembri et al., 2010). A range of studies explore the similar ways people relate to brands as they relate to other people (Fournier, 1998; Razmus et al., 2017). Based on the observations that consumers seek brands with personalities that match their own (Sarkar et al., 2015), marketers work to create brand personalities designed to target specific consumer segments (Aaker, 1997; Schembri et al., 2010). As a result, say Angle and Forehand (2016),

Brand personalities are carefully crafted to appeal to target consumers, advertising user imagery is developed to create aspiration, and social media is utilized to reinforce personal connection with brands. All of these tactics highlight the value of self-brand association, the direct link between a brand and a consumer's self-concept. (p. 183)

Dynamic Construction and “Brand Repositories”

Shifting social environments—varying depending on the relational dynamics of any given situation—mean that the self is constructed dynamically. To address the dynamism of

construct of self, marketing researchers think in terms of “brand repositories” stocked with a range of identity-expression tools, available to choose, depending on the social requirements of the moment. Recognizing that construction in the present takes place with an eye toward the future, these repositories include “aspirational brands” meant to communicate a consumer’s desired self.

Clinical context: Malleable and multiple selves. Its dynamic, situational construction means that construct of self is malleable, multiple, and sometimes aspirational (Matsumoto, 2009; McVittle & McKinlay; Oyserman et al., 2012; VandenBos, 2015). One may have many social selves (James, 1890)—continuously fashioned and refashioned as conversation unfolds ... [and] conversational interlocutors position each other's identity as they speak” (Gergen, 2011, p. 10)—but the healthy self must *perceive* itself as stable (Oyserman et al., 2012). As the discourse changes, so does construct of self, each a variation adapted to social interaction and desired outcome (McVittle & McKinlay, 2017).

Construct of self is not only tweakable in the moment, it also evolves over time (Fournier, 1998; Matsumoto, 2009; VandenBos, 2015), often shaped by aspirations of a future self (Swann & Bosson, 2010). Jung understood this evolution as a life-long progression toward individuation and achievement of the ultimate life goal (Matsumoto, 2009). Consistent with Adler’s view of expression of the self as a tool for seeking fulfillment (VandenBos, 2015), projections about the individuated future self invariably become aspirational (Oyserman et al., 2012; Swann & Bosson, 2010). The resulting possibilities motivate behaviors aimed at avoiding undesired selves and aspiring to desired selves (Swann & Bosson, 2010).

Marketing applications: Repositories of meaning. The dynamism of construction expands the range and frequency of brands’ participation in construction. The malleability of self, the social need for multiple selves, and aspirations of possible future selves increases the

raw materials needed to construct personal narratives. The shifting backdrop of social experience requires not just the continual reordering of self-identity, but also a deep well of available brands (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). “Brands,” says Fournier (1998), “were shown to serve as powerful repositories of meaning purposively and differentially employed in the substantiation, creation, and (re)production of concepts of self in the marketing age” (p. 365). These brand repositories offer resources that creative consumers may use to command respect, inspire self-love, and achieve an ego-ideal (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). The scope of these repositories serve consumers’ ever-changing “brand repertoires” (Estrela et al., 2014), letting them constitute the self as an act of agency, free from the domination of the marketplace (Shankar et al., 2006). Due to its malleability, the self requires active construction (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), as well as a continuous process of monitoring brand consumption to adjust personal narratives (Schembri et al., 2010). By consuming appropriate brands, consumers can construct and re-construct their identities, or possible selves (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Shankar et al., 2006). By attaining a sacred status, brands can motivate and inspire life goals (Sarkar et al., 2015).

Person-in-Environment and Consumer Socialization

From a social constructionist perspective, the self is very much the product of the prevailing culture; individual narratives are subplots of sweeping epics, with the self constructed as part of a process of socialization. Marketing researchers with an appreciation of the cultural construction of the self seek to participate actively in the culture.

Clinical context: “Raw materials” of meaning. Clinical social work acknowledges the importance of cultural influences, stressing cultural competence and approaching its work with a theoretical orientation toward person-in-environment. It is culture, after all, that provides most of the building blocks nested within the construct of self (Oyserman et al., 2012; Saleebey, 1994:

Stillman, 2016; Swann & Bosson, 2010). Ultimately, culture provides the context for the stories that people construct and tell about themselves (White & Epston, 1989, 1990) as cited in Besley, 2002). A personal narrative's meanings—either uncovered or conveyed by the narratives that weave through mezzo-levels of family and community, as well as at the macro-level of the prevailing culture—become derivative, a subplot of grander cultural narratives (Béres, 2002; Besley, 2002; Carr, 1998; Levy, 2006/2007; Stillman, 2016; Wallis et al., 2011). As Saleebey (1994) describes it,

We get the raw material for our meanings, however provisional, from culture. ... Culture insinuates its patterns on us, and they become embedded deeply within us. ... Culture is the means by which we receive, organize, rationalize, and understand our particular experiences in the world. (p. 352)

To insinuate its patterns—and consistent with the way social learning theory explains how repetition increases a message's potential to shape perceptions (Bandura, 1977, as cited in Levy, 2006/2007)—culture repeatedly delivers its broad narrative. These narratives become both repository and conveyor of the shared knowledge that is culture (Twitchell, 1999). Culture, in turn, shapes people's identities (Stillman, 2016) and creates context for experience (Besley, 2002). Within that cultural narrative, conclusions are assumed, meanings and norms are taken for granted, and individual narratives are influenced in ways possibly perceived, often barely sensed, and sometimes completely undetected (Stillman, 2016).

The way the grand narrative of one's culture shapes the subplots of one's own personal narrative—whether above or below consciousness—results in the process known as socialization (Levy, 2006/2007). By teaching individuals to exist in their social environments (Ward, 1974), the process of socialization serves to construct the self. When successful, socialization harmonizes individuals to their prevailing cultures, helping them author micro-level, individual

narratives that, as logical, satisfying subplots, fit into broader mezzo- and macro-level narratives of family, community, and culture. With culture providing the “raw materials,” the process of socialization cements the link between one’s construct of self and the culture into which one is socialized (Rogers, 1947; Stillman, 2016; Swann & Bosson, 2010).

Marketing applications: Cultural embeds. As clinical practitioners excavate the cultural constructions at play in their clients’ environments, marketing research explores ways to participate in the prevailing culture. The result is a body of academic literature that examines consumer culture, seeks ways to embed brands into the culture, and looks to effect consumer socialization.

Consumer culture. Harvard business professor Holt (2002) describes “consumer culture [as] the ideological infrastructure that undergirds what and how people consume and sets the ground rules for marketers’ branding activities” (p. 80). As meanings bubble up from the culture to be transferred into brands (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), they work to engineer the ideological infrastructure and to set the ground rules.

“All brands,” asserts O’Reilly’s (2005) “are cultural texts” (p. 582). As cultural resources, brands convey cultural meaning (McCracken, 1986) and participate actively within the circuit of culture (O’Reilly, 2005). Yes, brands, in their own right function as sociocultural constructs (O’Reilly, 2005) as cultural content attains social value by passing through branded goods (Holt, 2002) and goods come to embody the order of culture (McCracken, 1986). Within a consumer society, meaning moves from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods, and then, somewhat altered by the process of transfer, back to the individual consumer (McCracken, 1986). Marketers find themselves in the position to engineer brands (Holt, 2002), largely due to this process of transferring and transforming meaning from the culture to a brand, and back again. Brands may reinforce consumer aspirations and cultural ideals (Cooper et al., 2010), but

also, by design, shape those aspirations and ideals. As a result, “scientific and Freudian branders pursue ever more aggressive cultural engineering techniques” (Holt, 2002, p. 82).

Consumer Socialization. Cultural engineering can result in consumer socialization, a phrase popularized by Harvard marketing professor Scott Ward’s study of children’s development as consumers (John, 1999). “Consumer socialization,” as defined by Ward (1974), refers to the “processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (p. 1).

As agents of socialization, brands play a significant role (Estrela et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2015), participating in the “social experience and the achievement of a desired reality” (Cooper et al., 2010, p. 558) and providing a “sense of belongingness” (Sarkar et al., 2015, p. 270). Consumer socialization works to “imprint” children with positive brand associations (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005) and plays “a vital role in their learning from consumption and construction of their mental maps” (Estrela et al., 2014, p. 224). Childhood’s many indelible lessons, it seems, include those related to consumer behavior (Harris et al., 2015), brand attitudes (Ward, 1974), and, of special interest to marketers, the acquisition of life-long brand loyalty (Moschis et al., 1984).

Interest in consumer socialization draws heavily on concepts developed by the disciplines of clinical social work, psychology, and other social sciences. Bandura’s social learning theory, for example, is integral to understanding consumer socialization (Burman et al., 2017; Carnevale et al., 2017; Estrela et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2015). Consumer culture theory (CCT), meanwhile, draws on Foucault to provide an alternative to the cognitive-developmental perspective (Nairn et al., 2008). Through a sociocultural lens, CCT asserts that economic and political factors in the contemporary marketplace shape socialization by limiting how consumers think, feel, and act (Fournier, 1988; Nairn et al., 2008). Also influencing marketing research are developmental

insights from Piaget (Belk, 1988; John, 1999; Moschis et al., 1984; Pagla & Brennan, 2014) and Erikson (Belk, 1988; Burman et al., 2017; Hirschman & Woodside, 2010).

Parallels between child development and the ability to internalize brand meaning, in fact, does drive much of the research into consumer socialization (Moschis et al., 1984; Pagla & Brennan, 2014). John (1999), for example, relates how each successive stage of child development brings increasingly sophisticated patterns of brand consumption. An individual's increasing ability to use possessions as an "extended self," meanwhile, hews to Erikson's life stages (Belk, 1988). Developments in brand comprehension proceeds along three, distinct stages (John, 1999), starting with recognition as early as 6 months old, progressing to preference at age 3, and culminating in knowledge of a brand's symbolic dimensions in adolescence. The curiosity and cataloging of a child's sensorimotor stage permit the formation of mental images of brands and mascots (Estrela et al., 2014; Dotson & Hyatt, 2005). With object permanence and the preoperational expression of concepts, comes the ability, not just to recall brands (John, 1999), but to ask for them by name (Estrela et al., 2014; Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; John, 1999). Although each stage primes the brain's facility with brands, it is the third stage of cognitive development that finally permits brand loyalty (Harris et al., 2015; John, 1999; Moschis et al., 1984). Brand preferences and status associations that have been percolating since preschool (Rodhain & Aurier, 2016; John, 1999) reach full force. The conceptual dexterity, counterfactual thinking, and abstract logic and reasoning of Piaget's formal operations level of cognitive development (Moschis et al., 1984) let young consumers internalize a brand's symbolic meaning (John, 1999). At this stage of consumer socialization, children have acquired the discursive capability to build brands into their perceptual maps (Estrela et al., 2014), have made brand symbolism central to their everyday cultural practices (Nairn et al., 2008), and have begun to use brands to express personality and social connection (Harris et al., 2015).

Embedded brands. Recognition of brand as both cultural resource and socialization agent drives a move within marketing to “embed” brands in the culture. By giving marketers another level of communication (Schembri et al., 2010), embedding brands becomes an effective brand management strategy (Cooper et al., 2010). Simple product placement—which puts a logo on clear view in television, movies, and other media—is a familiar and obvious tactic for garnering more notice than from advertising during commercial breaks (Ong, 2004). Except, this tactic fails to take full advantage of a brand’s symbolic meaning and narrative power. A brand’s “psychic power,” remember, does not lie in the product, but in the story it *symbolizes*.

Research into consumer culture and consumer socialization uses information- and narrative-processing models to explore the interplay between brand stories and a show’s narrative and characters (Bhatnagar & Wan, 2011). Since brands are cultural texts (O'Reilly, 2005), the real opportunity for marketers is not to place a *product* on a set, but to merge a brand’s and a TV show’s *meanings*. When brand narratives become subtext of the overarching TV and movie narratives, consumers immerse themselves in the merged cultural text (Bhatnagar & Wan, 2011). Before engaging with these cultural texts, research centered on uncovering a brand’s experiential meaning can result in cultural embeds that deepen consumers’ understanding of brand meaning (Schembri et al., 2010). Also needed, say Bhatnagar and Wan (2011) is research into the effects of embedded brands on audience-character dynamics and on the media narratives where they appear. Vashisht and Pillai (2017), meanwhile, seek to expand marketing knowledge related to positioning and embedding brands in advergames. To shape consumption ideals, Cooper and colleagues (2010) urge brand managers to work with screenwriters to integrate brand narratives into television and film.

An episode of the USA Television Network’s *Burn Notice* demonstrates how brand managers and show-runners merge brand and TV show narratives. One of *Burn Notice*’s

conventions is recurring voiceover from main character Michael Weston, often beginning, “When you’re a spy” The spycraft offered in one sequence centers on the Hyundai Genesis Coupe. “Making a getaway is often more about precise handling than raw horsepower,” Michael says in voiceover, “so in a hostile situation, rear wheel drive is a nice advantage. That said, it doesn’t hurt to have over 300 horsepower at your fingertips” (Nix & Horowitz, 2010). Visible in close-up while Michael talks are the car manufacturer's logo, as well as each of the features he describes. Integration of brand stories and pop culture narratives leads to the advent of online games that center on branded products. In these “advergAMES,” brand-specific messages merge with game-play (Vashisht & Pillai, 2017). Once more, *Burn Notice* and Hyundai offer an example. A plainly stated purpose of the online game, *Burn Notice: Black Ops*—developed with the show’s writers and actors—was to create more opportunities for cultural integration (Ward, 2010). As an integral part of the *Black Ops* user experience, players virtually drive a Genesis while becoming familiar with its selling points (Ward, 2010).

Brand extensions, meanwhile, expand focus beyond entertainment media. With consumer socialization as an added benefit, Ford Motor Company places its product in the playground by partnering with Tonka to offer a toy F-150. Harley Davidson, meanwhile, offers branded rattles, baby blankets, toy motorbikes, and clothing (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005). Even consumers who cannot afford consumption of the actual products can consume the brands vicariously by buying these products and identifying with the symbolic meaning (Escalas, 2004; Cooper et al., 2010).

The Self and Clinical Mental Health Practice

Its many facets make it clear that any influence on the self might affect clients’ mental health. This observation becomes more than a truism when considered within a social constructionist framework. Meaning is found—or, in the case of psychopathology, *not* found—in the discursive space of constructing the narratives that construct the self. When in a state of

“generic unity,” the self creates a sense of “connectedness or unbrokenness” (James, 1890), perceived stability of self (Oyserman et al., 2012; Rogers, 1947), and feelings of well-being (Oyserman et al., 2012). Construct of self plays decisive roles in determining behavior and in defining personality (Oyserman et al., 2012; Rogers, 1947), while the integration of self-structures promotes resilience (Swann & Bosson, 2010). Summarizing the link between mental health and construct of self, Rogers (1947) notes:

When all of the ways in which the individual perceives himself—all perceptions of the qualities, abilities, impulses, and attitudes of the person, and all perceptions of himself in relation to others—are accepted into the organized conscious concept of the self, then this achievement is accompanied by feelings of comfort and freedom from tension which are experienced as psychological adjustment. (p. 364)

Human beings who successfully create meaning, and therefore successfully build themselves into their worlds, wind up well-adjusted and, generally speaking, mentally healthy. What happens to those who do not successfully create meaning?

A Disordered Self

Failure to organize these perceptions into the conscious concept of the self, at the least, threatens one’s well-being; at its worse, the disorganization can manifest as diagnostic criteria for a personality disorder (Oyserman et al., 2012). Disturbances in the development and maintenance of the self can result in faulty schemas and dysfunctional inner working models (Pearlman & Courtois, 2005). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) delineates five levels of self-functioning, describing adaptive functioning (Level 0) as an “experience of oneself as unique, with clear boundaries between self and others; stability of self-esteem and accuracy of self-appraisal; capacity for, and ability to regulate, a range of emotional experience” (American

Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 762). Jung's (1979) description of a helpless ego, at risk of assimilation by unconscious components of the self, hints at the vulnerability of the construct of self. With extreme impairment (Level 4), comes the kind of grave disturbances that James (1890) notes can lead to "insane delusions" (p. 375) or worse. Depersonalization and derealization describe a condition of feeling that, "I have no self" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 302). Other disturbances in self are at the core of personality psychopathology (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Stemming from Freud's view of narcissism as a disordered self (Swann & Bosson, 2010), current diagnoses frame narcissistic personality disorder as a self too much in the thrall of others for self-definition and self-esteem (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Schizotypal personality disorder, meanwhile, describes a state of "confused boundaries between self and others; distorted self-concept; emotional expression often not congruent with context or internal experience" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 769).

Impairment need not be extreme, and disturbances need not be grave, to warrant the attention of clinicians. Any instability, disconnectedness, break, or fragmentation of the self has the potential to reverberate throughout clinical practice. Problems arise when one's experience of the self conflicts with one's perceptions of self (Matsumoto, 2009; Rogers, 1947). Without nourishment from the social environment, identity and self suffer (Swann & Bosson, 2010). Damage and loss to the extended self can bring depression (James, 1890), as can self-other confusions or conflicting perceptions between loved ones (Swann & Bosson, 2010) or failure to navigate the dynamic construction of multiple selves (James, 1890).

From a social construction perspective, the self becomes disordered when adaptive discursive processes derail (Tilsen & Nylund, 2016). Problems arise when one's dominant narrative runs counter to lived experience (Carr, 1998) or when experience of self conflicts with one's perceptions of self (Matsumoto, 2009; Rogers, 1947). Individual stories that don't fit with

a culture's meanings and norms risk problems in daily life (Stillman, 2016). Disruptions in discourse create discord with daily rhythms and introduce problem stories into individual narratives (Wallis et al., 2011). These problem stories get people stuck in ongoing crises or other kinds of trouble (Saleebey, 1994; Wallis et al., 2011). Discordant narratives amplify preexisting problem stories (White, 1995, as cited in Béres, 2002), muddying meanings, distorting perceptions, and dislocating individuals from coherent narratives.

Brands and the Self

The mere presence of brands within construct of self does not automatically bode ill for one's mental health. Marketing researchers point out how brand consumption benefits consumers by offering new ways to create a meaningful life (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988) or how it can liberate them from marketplace domination (Shankar et al., 2006). Using goods to constitute the self need not cause problems (McCracken, 1986). The possessions included in the extended self can make positive contributions to consumers' identities (Belk, 1988) and can enhance wellbeing (Ahuvia, 2005). There is no reason a brand repository cannot serve as just one more cultural resource, one more source of raw materials for constructing the self.

Even so, one can imagine how a process of construction that includes brands might get derailed. Any potentially adaptive process has the potential to be maladaptive. If loved ones' conflicting perceptions of self can result in depression (Swann & Bosson, 2010)—and if one can enter into a multifaceted self-brand relationship (Angle & Forehand, 2016; Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Fournier, 1998; Razmus et al., 2017; Sarkar et al., 2015) based on brand personality (D. Aaker, 1996; J. Aaker, 1997; Ahuvia, 2005; Angle & Forehand, 2016; Fournier, 1998; Sarkar et al., 2015; Schembri et al., 2010)—what happens to someone entangled in a toxic self-brand relationship with a brand personality who is bad news? Might the psychological problems that arise from self-other confusions (Swann & Bosson, 2010) stem from

troubled self-brand associations? Considering the depression and other “psychic pain” that results from failing to navigate the dynamic construction of multiple selves (James, 1890), how well do brand repositories of meaning serve all the diverse and possibly incongruous aspects of the total self? Might one come to rely too heavily on branded possessions to provide meaning and construct the self? What happens when we look to a brand to provide meaning that it does not possess? What is the effect on the construct when a self-defining act of brand consumption is beyond our financial means? In the ideal scenario, the transfer of cultural meanings to goods facilitates their use in personal narratives (McCracken, 1986). But, might that transfer go wrong, and the meanings become commodified? Narratives imposed from outside our culture prevent us from owning our meanings (Saleebey, 1994). Might consumer culture impose outside meanings? Personal narratives that don’t fit with a culture’s meanings and norms inflict psychological pain (Stillman, 2016). Might consumer socialization impose meanings and norms out-of-sync with personal narratives? When there is narrative discord, individual narratives can become riddled with problem stories (Wallis et al., 2011). Can brand stories become problem stories?

The Self and Clinicians

The way that client narratives affect intentions, actions, feelings, moods, and relationships (Saleebey, 1994) has implications that encompass most modalities of clinical practice. Meanwhile, the DSM-5 notes that “mental representations of the self ... affect the nature of interaction with mental health professionals, and can have a significant impact on both treatment efficacy and outcome” (p. 722). As it relates to the self, the hope in clinical practice is to venture below conscious awareness to stabilize, unify, repair breaks, and integrate. “In therapy,” says Rogers (1947), “perceptual changes are more often concerned with the self than with the external world” (p. 359). The aspirational malleability of the construct of self provides

clinicians with the opportunity to deconstruct and reorder disordered selves (Besley, 2002; Carr, 1998; Tilsen & Nylund, 2016; Stillman, 2016).

All this—the prevalence of brands embedded in the social environment, the meanings embedded into those brands, the marketing research that focuses on building brands into construct of self and the credibility of its arguments, and the importance to therapy of the self and the meanings within its construct—begs a question.

What can the clinical social work, psychology, and other mental health literature tell practitioners about the relationship between consumer brands and their clients' constructs of self?

The following narrative review of the literature evaluates what information is available to research-oriented, evidence-based mental health practitioners. Although the mental health literature does not pay nearly as much attention to brands and construct of self as does the marketing literature, a story emerges from what is missing.

Conceptual Framework

The social constructionist framework that has so far informed the discussion also guides this narrative review of the literature. Most relevant is the framework's conceptualization of the self as a construction. Also significant is that the self is constructed narratively, socially and relationally, dynamically, and in discourse with one's cultural environment.

Methodology

This narrative review of the literature consisted of two searches, each conducted on March 26, 2018 – search #1 in the *PsycINFO* and *PsycARTICLES* (PSYC) databases and search #2 in the *SocINDEX with Full Text* and *Social Work Abstracts* (SW) databases. Both searches sought peer-reviewed articles, written in English, published after Belk (1988) introduced his seminal extended self theory. Both searches specified an exact match of the terms “‘brand OR

branding’ AND ‘construct of self OR constructing the self OR self-concept OR self concept OR self-concept OR self construct OR self-construct’”. The idea of adding “OR self” to PSYC was abandoned when it brought back an unwieldy 305 unrelated results. Adding “OR self” to SW, on the other hand, did not increase the number of results. Search #1 specified search fields as “All subjects & indexing – SU.” Search #2 specified search fields as “SU Subject Terms.” The idea of searching elsewhere than the subject fields was abandoned when it resulted in 916 and 722 unrelated hits in PSYC and SW, respectively.

Publication inclusion criteria included those journals centered on clinical practice such as the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, the *Clinical Social Work Journal*, and *Social Work in Mental Health*, as well as journals covering broader topics such as sociology, personality, and youth and adolescence.

The results of each search were refined by excluding publications explicitly intended for marketing, branding, or business audiences (such as the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, the *Journal of Economic Psychology*, and *Psychology and Marketing*). From the publications that met inclusion criteria, the results were further refined by excluding articles whose subjects featured unrelated hyphenations of “self-” (such as “self-disclosure” or “self-monitoring”), and by excluding occurrences of the word “brand” when used as a surname, when referring to the marketing of private practices, or when not related to marketing or consumer brands.

Articles that met all criteria received ratings from 1 to 5 based on their relevance to clinical mental health practice. A rating of 1 indicates that the article has little or no relevance; 2 indicates low relevance (directly aimed at a business audience but remotely raising an issue or question where future clinically focused research might inform mental health practice); 3 indicates possible relevance (directly aimed at a business audience, but touching on issues possibly related to mental health practice and/or aimed at a broader audience); 4 indicates

probable relevance (aimed at practitioners but not focused on clinical practice); and 5 indicates that the article explicitly addresses some aspect of treating or preventing mental illness and is therefore directly relevant to clinical practice.

Findings and Discussion

With the exception of “The Branded Self” (Berger, 2011), the articles identified in searches #1 and #2 shared the focus and intended audience of those found in the marketing, branding, and business literature. None of the publications that met inclusion criteria focused on clinical mental health practice. Searches #1 and #2 initially brought back 109 and 24 results, respectively. Excluding publications with an explicit focus on marketing, branding, or business (Appendix A, p. 67) reduced hits to 16 and 11, respectively. Publications that met inclusion criteria (Appendix B, p. 69) were further refined by excluding unrelated hyphenations of “self-” and of the word “brand” (Appendix C, p. 70). In addition to these findings, a broader, less systematic search of peer-reviewed literature—as well as a supplemental exploration of blogs, periodicals, and other grey literature—made it possible to tell a richer story.

From the Databases

Ultimately, 10 articles (Table 1, p. 65) met all search criteria. Of these 10 articles, 9 appear in PSYC, and 1 appears in SW. Eight of the 10 PSYC articles reported studies conducted by their authors. Of the 19 total contributing authors, 12 had affiliations with the advertising, business, communications, economics, or marketing departments of their respective universities. Although 5 of these studies appear in publications focused on psychology, all 8 focus on the marketing applications of their findings. As a result, none of the 10 articles received ratings of either 4 (indicating probable relevance to clinical practice) or 5 (indicating an explicit focus on the treatment of mental health). Four articles received a rating of 3, three because they touched on issues of mental health and one because of its theoretical, social constructionist

conceptualizations of brand and self. Two articles received a rating of 2, each because they remotely raised an issue or question that could be incorporated into mental health-focused research. Finally, four of the articles received a rating of 1, each due to its sole focus on the marketing implications of the research.

Possibly relevant. Three of the four articles to be rated 3 may directly target business audiences but, by providing insight into self-esteem or narcissism, also have potential implications for clinical practice. Tunca (2018) builds on previous research establishing the tendency of individuals to enhance self-concept by consuming brands associated with positive identities. This study finds that, as an adolescent's discrepancy between explicit (deliberate, controlled) and implicit (automatic, uncontrolled) self-esteem rises, so does the likelihood that he or she will use in-group-linked brands to construct his or her self-concept. Although Tunca's (2018) stated intent is to "add to the psychology and consumer behavior literature" (p. 5), findings related to reducing dissonant self-evaluation and enhancing self-concept with self-brand connections have potential relevance to clinical practice. Similarly, Lisjak and colleagues (2012) find a correlation between low implicit self-esteem and "defend[ing a preferred] brand in a way similar to defending the self" (p. 1124). Their findings also suggest that brands may be incorporated into self-concept (Lisjak et al., 2012). Lee, Gregg, and Park (2013), meanwhile use the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) to correlate degrees of dysfunction with consumption of brands that are exclusive, customizable, or promote personal uniqueness. As a result, knowledge of consumer narcissism could help market researchers predict consumption of status brands (Lee, Gregg, & Park, 2013). Their findings, they say, "could markedly augment the ability of researchers to predict the purchase of branded or status goods (p. 348). An added benefit of their findings, they say, is "that narcissism seems to be on the rise [and] narcissists,

relative to non-narcissists, should be particularly susceptible to scarcity appeals” (Lee et al., p. 348).

Of the articles to be rated 3, only “The Branded Self” (Berger, 2011) talks explicitly about brand as part of construct of self. Although it does not address the implications for mental health, it does offer, in a single, cogent essay, a social constructionist view of how brands shape identities by “signifying who we are to others” (Berger, 2011, p. 232). By doing so, the essay hints that using brands to define the self could affect mental health. The following passage, in particular, gives clinicians something to mull.

If a self is a kind of conversation we have with ourselves, what happens when we get tired of certain brands and switch to others? Is there a kind of dissociation that occurs as we take on a new self based on new brands that we now find attractive? (Berger, 2011, p. 235)

Low relevance. Despite their focus on brand strategy, there is, embedded within both of the articles rated 2, some aspect that might be applied to clinical practice research. By providing psychometric support for the brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) scale, and by showing invariance across gender and culture, Razmus and Laguna (2017) introduce an instrument that may prove useful to clinical research. Trump and Brucks (2011), meanwhile, address mental health directly, saying, “the inclusion of loved brands in the self has concrete implications for ... psychological well-being [and] may lead to deep-seated psychological benefits” (p. 13). These benefits include maintaining self-esteem in threatening situations and engaging “extreme behaviors such as championing brands when there is “self-brand overlap” (Trump & Brucks, 2011).

Little or no relevance. Four articles received a rating of 1, offering little or no relevance to clinical practice. In addition to detecting more self-brand congruity in western cultures (such

as the United States) than in East Asian culture (such as Korea), Sung and Choi (2012) find “that brand personality traits, which marketers can carefully craft and promote, can be the central driver of persuasion and brand preference” (p. 163). Meanwhile, Tidwell, Horgan, and Kenny (1993) show how self-image and brand image stokes brand loyalty and drives purchase behavior. Understanding the “deep psychological basis” of brand attitudes, they say, could lead to “a test which could predict ... what kinds of people would buy a particular kind of product [which] would be invaluable to the business community” (Tidwell, Horgan, & Kenny, 1993, p. 353). Finally, van Baaren and Ruivenkamp (2007) demonstrate how people prefer brands with values congruent with their self-construal, while Wong (2013) takes an indexical approach to the linguistic construction of identity to explore how unconventional spelling can create a unique brand identity.

Broader Search Criteria

To get a clinical perspective on brand and construct of self, one must venture beyond systematic searches and peer-reviewed databases. Setting aside concerns with the self, and searching instead within the subject fields “‘brand OR branding’ AND ‘mental illness OR mental disorder’”, brings back two results in the PSYC databases, both focused on marketing prescription medicine. The same search in SW brings back one result, also focused on marketing drugs. Searching more generally for “‘marketing AND mental illness’ OR mental disorder” results in 21 articles in PSYC and in 27 articles in SW (after applying publication exclusion criteria). Most of these articles center on marketing to raise awareness, reduce stigma, or some other campaign to alter perceptions of mental illness.

Peer-reviewed. Nibbling at the edges of peer-reviewed clinical mental health literature—searching in a way that is much more inductive than systematic—one finds suggestions of insights to come. Several authors advocate for focusing on popular culture as part of clinical

practice. Inspired by Foucault, they call for poststructuralist analysis that incorporates self and cultural contexts (Besley, 2002), as well as critical consumption of pop culture texts (Béres, Bowles, & Fook, 2011; Tilsen & Nylund, 2016). Such critical reflection and deconstruction of favorite texts can give therapists insights into clients' imaginative lives (Béres, 2002) and can foster client agency (Tilsen & Nylund, 2016). Specific benefits of deconstructing pop culture texts in client narratives include glimpsing clients' imaginations, aspirations, and perceived deficits (Béres, 2002), helping women identify and re-author problem stories related to sexual stereotypes portrayed in magazines (Levy, 2006/2007), and helping adolescents understand their own stories relative to the narratives in hip-hop music (Heath & Arroyo, 2014). The way textual analysis strips bare encoded meanings and messages, say Tilsen and Nylund (2016), makes "pop culture ... something to contend with in therapy" (p. 225).

Missing from the conversation is recognition of O'Reilly's (2005) observation that brands can be read as cultural texts. Tilsen and Nylund (2016) define "pop culture [as] all consumer commodities that share broad popularity among everyday people within a culture [that] include[s] commodities and practices such as: music, fashion trends, sports, technology and social media, video games, film and TV" (p. 228). Somehow, this nearly comprehensive list of relevant texts omits consumer brands.

Grey literature. Dig deep enough into blogs, periodicals, and other grey literature, and you can find some clinicians wondering about brands' potential effects on mental health. At least one, Zurich-based psychoanalyst Max Lusensky, is specifically interested in matters of brand, the self, *and* mental health. Lusensky (2017), who came to psychoanalysis after a career in public relations, says, "Our patterns of consumption—specifically what brands we purchase—are an integral part of how we construct our identities. (Are you a Mac or a PC?)" As a result, "consumer brands have become pieces in the therapeutic puzzle that is post-modern identity"

(Lusensky, 2016, p. 40). In a psychoanalytic sense, a brand is an “imago” (Lusensky, 2014). In a Jungian sense, brands are “structured like psychological complexes [and] can have pathological effects ... on the human psyche” (Lusensky, 2016, p. 34). As a consequence of constantly seeking selfhood, the “post-modern psyche” takes on

... an endless narcissistic preoccupation with social identity and “self,” unconsciously projected in the reflexive meeting with “the other”: brands, social media and communication technology. *Socially constructing* an identity through a narrative of experiences and consumption, building a shining mask of “persona” we form our false branded self [emphasis added]. (Lusensky, 2014)

Contemporary culture as a whole, says Lusensky, warrants a diagnosis of “brand neurosis” (Lusensky, 2014) or even “brandpsychosis” (Lusensky, 2016), with the following three diagnostic criteria: *Fragmentation*, as the narcissistic consequence of socially constructing an identity through a narrative of consumption to form a false branded self; *disassociation*, based on the way brands construct libido, stimulate and mirror unconscious complexes and instinctual desires, and, ultimately, alter our state of reality; and, *cognitive dissonance*, stemming from the paradoxical promise of a better tomorrow premised on taking action *today* (Lusensky, 2014, 2016).

Although not as comprehensive as Lusensky, a handful of bloggers and periodicals are connecting some of the dots between brand, the self, and a potential impact on mental health. Douglas Van Praet (2017), who founded a marketing consultancy but blogs on PsychologyToday.com, explains how just seeing a preferred brand can elevate one’s dopamine levels. His description of how continual exposure to a brand conditions a Pavlovian sense of joy (Van Praet, 2017) echoes Lusensky’s (2014) portrayal of brands as “carefully constructed symbols aimed to trigger our ... instinctual drives [through] repeated experiences and contact

with the brand.” Such repetition, says (Rosenberg, 2004), turns brand consumption into a function of rote cognitive processing. Neuroscience professor William Klemm (2014) offers a blog entry about how advertisers “capitalize on social identity [to] get you to spend more money.” A *Monitor on Psychology* (American Psychological Association, 2004) cover story notes that “a glut of marketing messages encourages teens to tie brand choices to their personal identity” (p. 60). In that story, psychologist Susan Linn notes that identity-oriented branding discourages difference (American Psychological Association, 2004). The article also cites child psychologist Allen Kanner’s concern that linking brands to self-value distorts the organic process of identity development (American Psychological Association, 2004). In *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, edited by Kanner and psychologist Tim Kasser, Rosenberg (2004) tells of the consumer economy’s “marketing character” a personality type, devoid of connection and inherent worth, that experiences the self as a commodity. As a long-time observer of the impacts of brands and consumer culture, James Twitchell (1999) says, “We have exchanged knowledge of history and science ... for a knowledge of brands and how brands interlock to form coherent social patterns” (p. 195). “The myth of truth residing in art has been replaced by the myth of value residing in objects” (Twitchell, 1996, p. 44). In a culture developed to expedite consumption, brands “displace or colonize the traditional role of culture” (Twitchell, 1996, p. 41). When brand’s “myth of value” replaces art’s “myth of truth,” the cultural imperative is “to inch you closer to the buyhole” (Twitchell, 2004, p. 26). Nancy Colier (2012), a psychotherapist, minister, and clinical social worker, also worries about commodification of the self. “To brand our self,” she blogs, “is to turn our self into a product—a knowable and repeatable experience” (Colier, 2012).

Implications for Clinical Social Work

The intersection of social environment, social construction of the self, and mental health suggests that an environmental factor such as brand could impact social work practice. Since identity and self depend on nourishment from the social environment (Swann & Bosson, 2010), it would matter what nourishment is on offer. Since we fashion symbolic meaning into personal narratives to create our own meaning and build ourselves into the world (Saleebey, 1994), it would matter what symbolic meanings are conveyed by consumer brands. Since the self is shaped by the language we use “to story our lives” (Carr, 1998), it would matter what vocabularies one appropriated from brand repositories. Since therapy that alters perception of self alters behavior (Rogers, 1947), a clinician’s improved understanding of a client’s construct of self would have the potential to improve outcomes. Since a clinician faced with a personal narrative laced with problem stories begins by deconstructing embedded meanings (Stillman, 2016), a fuller understanding of the sources of those meanings could help clients to reauthor their narratives.

Strikingly little empirical research investigates how mental health might be affected by marketing and consumer culture (American Psychological Association, 2004; Kasser & Kanner, 2003), and next-to-nothing focuses on the clinical implications of brand on construct of self. Lusensky (2016) walks back his diagnosis of “brandpsychosis,” noting that such a vigorous theory would require further study and data. A research project he calls “brand psychology” seeks to understand brands’ effects on mental health (Lusensky, 2017). Despite a growing body of business literature, even consumer-focused identity research is in its early stages (Klemm, 2014).

More striking is that the voice of clinical social work appears all-but absent from even the peripheral conversations, with Colier (2013) seemingly the lone licensed clinical social worker

wondering about brands, self, and mental health. That absence is starkest when viewed in light of the three reasons Kasser and Kanner (2003) give for psychology's apparent indifference to the impact of consumer culture. First, they note, "psychology has been relatively slow to focus on variables outside of the individual person" (Kasser & Kanner, 2003, p. 4). Then there is the field's "ambivalent attitude toward social policy and social criticism" (Kasser & Kanner, 2003, p. 5). Their recognition of psychology's blind spots beckons clinical social work to contribute its unique perspectives on person-in-environment and mezzo- and macro-levels of practice.

Meanwhile, the little that is being said, on the web and in periodicals, suggests that brands pose an inherent risk to construction of the self. "There is," notes Berger (2017), "something scary and anxiety provoking about the ability of researchers to probe our innermost thoughts and attitudes, the hidden realms of our psyches" (p. xxiii). According to Lusensky (2014), "the shadow side of psychoanalysis" leverages the therapeutic power of consumption to turn psychoanalysis into a tool for maintaining the status quo.

The place to find peer-reviewed discussions of brands, the self, and the implications of building one into the other, remarkably is the academic *marketing* literature. Marketing professor Aaron Ahuvia (2005), for example, recognizes how an incoherent, conflicted identity narrative can be psychologically problematic. Considering the diverse and possibly incongruous aspects of the total self, meanwhile, professor of business administration Russell Belk (1988), suggests that the extended self could extend too far and cautions against relying too heavily on possessions to provide meaning in life. Consumer studies professor Grant McCracken (1986) warns that "meaning transfer can go wrong" and result in "consumer pathologies." Problems arise, he says, when,

Many individuals seek kinds of meaning from goods that do not exist there. Others seek to appropriate kinds of meaning to which they are not, by some sober sociological

reckoning, entitled. Still others attempt to constitute their lives only in terms of the meaning of goods. (McCracken, 1986, p. 80)

Yes, notes Harvard Business School professor Douglas Holt (2002), there are some who believe that brands' "commodified meanings" might organize tastes and author lives. Marketing researchers Rasmus and colleagues (2017) agree that, while marketing and branding "technologies of self" might liberate, they also can have an authoritarian bent. Other marketing research demonstrates the marginalizing effects of conspicuous brand consumption (Croghan et al., 2006), how inconsistency between brands and social spheres affects children's self-esteem (Rodhain & Aurier 2016), and how consumer socialization can encourage hazardous drinking (Harris et al., 2015).

The first step to resisting an undue influence of brands, says Lusensky (2016), is to "start where all change must begin, by making what is unconsciousness conscious" (p. 55). Knowing how the "ad game really works" lets you focus on what a brand actually offers (Van Praet, 2017). An awareness of how marketing research works can prevent manipulation (Berger, 2017).

Future Research

The call for empirical data and entreaty to arm oneself with knowledge points future research in countless directions. First would be validation, from a clinical perspective, of the marketing journals' assertions that consumer brands can, in fact, become part of construct of self. A theoretical model for conceptualizing the psychosocial and developmental implications—akin to conceptualization such as *schemas*, *compensatory structures*, or *selfobjects*—also could prove helpful. From there, there are findings from the business literature that warrant examination from a clinical perspective. Berger (2011), cited above, could as easily be posing a research question as a rhetorical one: *Does* taking on one new self after another, built on brands from ever-changing repositories, effect "a kind of dissociation"? The psychic pain that stems from

unsuccessfully navigating the dynamic construction of multiple selves (James, 1890), the psychological problems that stem from incoherent, conflicted identity narratives (Ahuvia, 2005), and “the consumer pathologies” that stem from derailed meaning transfer (McCracken, 1986) raises questions about how these pathologies might present in a clinician’s consulting room.

If self-esteem can predict brand preference (Lisjak et al., 2012; Tunca, 2018), might certain patterns of brand consumption predict levels of self-esteem? If a threat to brand is perceived as a threat to self (Lisjak et al., 2012), can a threat to brand also traumatize the self? If certain brands feed off of narcissism (Lee et al., 2013), might those same brands aggravate its symptoms? If narcissists are “particularly susceptible” to certain brands (Lee et al., 2013), are other diagnoses susceptible to other kinds of brands? What are the real-world, clinical practice implications of segmenting consumers by mental disorder? If self-brand overlap can maintain self-esteem in some situations (Trump & Brucks, 2011), are there other situations where it might erode self-esteem? Might the extreme behaviors prompted by self-brand overlap (Trump & Brucks, 2011) ever become self-injurious? Kanner’s assertion that brands distort the organic, developmental process of self construction (American Psychological Association, 2004) deserves to be clinically tested. Potential psychological benefits (Trump & Brucks, 2011) point to research in another direction. Might brands play a role in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness? If including “loved brands” in the self can spark extreme behavior (Trump & Brucks, 2011), might they also motivate meaningful behavioral change? Finally, the brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) scale, psychometrically validated and demonstrated invariant across gender and culture (Rasmus & Laguna, 2017), is available possibly to help answer these questions and, certainly, to inspire others.

Limitations

This narrative review of the literature was limited by the shortage of directly relevant literature. Telling a story about what is *not* there requires stitching together snippets from sources that are indirectly relevant. Broadening search criteria and navigating grey literature provided those snippets and made it possible to tell a coherent story. Expanding focus from directly to indirectly relevant, however, increases the number of potential sources from barely a few to barely manageable. Winnowing requires judgment and, the greater amount of judgment required, the greater the potential for bias.

Conclusion

Although this turns out to be the story of what is *not* in the clinical social work and psychology literature, a narrative does emerge from a simple process of induction. Clients' constructs of self impact the daily work of mental health practitioners. A range of psychopathologies results when the developmental processes of constructing the self are not adaptive. The self, as a social construction, is constructed from resources mined from the social environment. Those resources sometimes create discord and disrupt developmental processes. Within our social environment, brands are an abundant and accessible resource. That abundance and accessibility grow out of an ample and coordinated infrastructure that propagates brands purposefully engineered to participate in the narrative, social, dynamic, and cultural processes of constructing the self. Tracking back from these concerted efforts to the impact of the self on clinical practice, it becomes clear that questions about building brands into construct of self warrant the attention of clinical social workers and other mental health practitioners – even if little is known about any potentially positive or negative clinical implications. For every action, there is a reaction. It goes to follow that marketing researchers' sophisticated understanding of

the self and their efforts to affect its construction might ripple somehow through clinical practice. What goes into the self must, in some way, come out.

Knowledge of mental health, blogs Philadelphia's Creative Repute Design Agency (2017), "can have a direct impact of how well brands perform." As a result, "more than ever ... mental health [is] being taken to consideration when it comes to branding" (Creative Repute, 2017). That assertion makes a compelling case for the converse: Branding should be taken into consideration when it comes to mental health.

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Table

Table 1

<i>Articles Meeting Search Criteria</i>						
Title	Publication	Author(s)/Yr	Dept(s)	Type	DB	Summary & Analysis
The branded self	<i>American Sociologist</i> , 42(2), 232-237	Berger, A. (2011)	Broadcast & Comm.	Essay	SW	"We are the brands we assemble to forge a public identity" (p. 232). Provides a clear but purely theoretical explanation of how constructs of brand and self might work together.
The person in the purchase: Narcissistic consumers prefer products that positively distinguish them	<i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i> , 105(2), 335-352	Lee, S. Y., Gregg, A. P., & Park, S. H. (2013)	Econ. & Business Admin / Psych.	Study	PSYC	Finds that narcissists, per the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), are more likely to consume brands that convey uniqueness or are exclusive and customizable. The practical implication is that, because narcissists are "particularly susceptible" to certain appeals, market researchers are better able to predict brand consumption.
When a threat to the brand is a threat to the self	<i>Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin</i> , 38(9), 1120-1132	Lisjak, M., Lee, A. Y., & Gardner, W. L. (2012)	Marketing	Study	PSYC	Demonstrates how identification with a brand can lead people to equate defending a preferred brand with preserving the self. The finding that this was more likely for those with low implicit self-esteem may shed some light on clinical practice.
Self-esteem discrepancies and identity-expressive consumption	<i>International Journal of Psychology</i> , 53(1), 1-6	Tunca, B. (2018)	Business & Law	Study	PSYC	Finds that adolescents with a larger explicit/implicit self-esteem discrepancy were more likely to construct their self-concepts using brands linked to their "in group." While the "results add to the psychology and consumer behavior literature [and] provide converging evidence on the importance of self-esteem discrepancies for consumer research" (p. 5), they also may suggest a direction for mental health research.
Brand engagement in self-concept: Scale properties and the global nature of the construct	<i>Current Psychology</i>	Razmus, W. & Laguna, M. (2017)	Psych.	Study	PSYC	Psychometrics show that the Brand Engagement in Self-Concept (BESC) scale is an effective measure of one's tendency to include brands in one's self-concept, and that it is effective across cultures. The BESC could serve as an instrument in research with an explicit clinical focus.

Table 1 (continued)

Articles Meeting Search Criteria							
Title	Publication	Author(s)/Yr	Dept.	Type	DB	Summary & Analysis	Rating
Overlap between mental representations of self and brand	<i>Self and Identity</i> , 11(4), 454-471	Trump, R. K. & Brucks, M. (2012)	Marketing	Study	PSYC	Finds that, as with loved ones and in-groups, mental representations of self also overlap with brands. The implication is that "self-brand overlap with a brand that represents aspects of one's ideal self may lead to deep-seated psychological benefits" (p. 13). Another implication is that "inclusion of a brand in the self [may make consumers] more willing to engage in extreme behaviors on behalf of the brand" (p. 13).	2
The influence of self-construal on self-brand congruity in the United States and Korea	<i>Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology</i> , 43(1), 151-166	Sung, Y. & Choi, S. M. (2012)	Advert.	Study	PSYC	Demonstrates that consumers put more value on brands with personality traits congruent with their self-concepts, and that the self-brand congruity effects are more evident in the US (western culture) than in Korea (East Asian culture).	1
Brand character as a function of brand loyalty	<i>Current Psychology</i> , 11(4), 347-353	Tidwell, P. M., Horgan, D. D., & Kenny, C. T. (1993)	Marketing / Psych.	Study	PSYC	"Study shows how consumer purchase behavior is related to self-image as well as brand image" (p. 352). The implication that it could be possible to predict consumers' brand consumption based on the "kind of people" they are "would be invaluable to the business community" (p. 353).	1
Self-construal and values expressed in advertising	<i>Social Influence</i> , 2(2), 136-144	van Baaren, R. B. & Ruivenkamp, M. (2007)	Social Psych.	Study	PSYC	Finds that people prefer brands with advertisements that express values congruent with their self-construal. One implication of this research is that "brand personality traits, which marketers can carefully craft and promote, can be the central driver of persuasion and brand preference" (p. 163).	1
Brand names and unconventional spelling: A two-pronged analysis of the orthographic construction of brand identity	<i>Written Language and Literacy</i> , 16(2), 115-145.	Wong, A. D. (2013).	Anthro.	Essay	PSYC	Demonstrates how unconventional spelling helps construct brand identities, which, in turn, contributes the sociolinguistic investigation of identity construction.	1

Appendix A

Excluded Publications

Search #1: (PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES)

<i>Appetite</i>	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>
<i>Applied Research in Quality of Life</i>	<i>Journal of Consumer Behaviour</i>
<i>Australasian Marketing Journal (AMJ)</i>	<i>Journal of Consumer Marketing</i>
<i>Clothing & Textiles Research Journal</i>	<i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i>
<i>Cornell Hospitality Quarterly</i>	<i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>
<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	<i>Journal of Gambling Studies</i>
<i>Information & Management</i>	<i>Journal of Global Marketing</i>
<i>International Journal of Advertising: The Quarterly Review of Marketing Communications</i>	<i>Journal of Health Communication</i>
<i>International Journal of Advertising: The Review of Marketing Communications</i>	<i>Journal of Marketing Communications</i>
<i>International Journal of Consumer Studies</i>	<i>Journal of Marketing Research</i>
<i>International Journal of Hospitality Management</i>	<i>Journal of Material Culture</i>
<i>International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing</i>	<i>Journal of Strategic Marketing</i>
<i>International Journal of Research in Marketing</i>	<i>Marketing Intelligence & Planning</i>
<i>Journal of Advertising</i>	<i>Marketing Letters</i>
<i>Journal of Advertising Research</i>	<i>International Marketing Review</i>
<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	<i>Psychology & Marketing</i>
	<i>Public Personnel Management</i>
	<i>Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal</i>
	<i>Young Consumers</i>

Search #2: SocINDEX + Social Work Abstracts*Advances in Consumer research*

Journal of Applied Psychology

Journal of Economic Psychology

Journal of Consumer Marketing

Journal of Political Economy

Journal of Consumer Psychology

Journal of Popular Culture

Journal of Consumer research

Service Industries Journal

Appendix B

Included Publications

Search #1 (PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES)*Acta Psychologica Sinica**American Journal of Public Health**Annual Review of Psychology**British Journal of Social Psychology**Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research**Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues**International Journal of Psychology**Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology**Journal of Experimental Psychology: General**Journal of Experimental Social Psychology**Journal of Personality and Social Psychology**Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin**Psychology of Popular Media Culture**Self and Identity**Sex Roles**Social Influence**Written Language and Literacy***Search #2: SocINDEX + Social Work Abstracts***American Sociologist**Journal of Personality & Social Psychology**Journal of Youth & Adolescence**Sex Roles**Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal**Social Influence*

Appendix C

Excluded Keywords

Unrelated Hyphenations of “Self-”

self-aggrandizement	self-identification
self-appraisal	self-identities
self-association	self-introspection
self-awareness	self-interrogation
self-based	self-knowledge
self-congruity	self-management
self-conscious	self-monitoring
self-consistency	self-perception
self-definitions	self-perpetuating
self-description	self-positivity
self-disclosure	self-presentation
self-discovery	self-referencing
self-development	self-regulate
self-efficacy	self-regulatory
self-esteem	self-report
self-evaluation	self-views
self-examination	self-words
self-expression	self-worth

Unrelated Uses of “Brand”

“branding the person of the therapist”	“Brand et al. (1992) found that”
“branding of the POTT model”	“careful to hide any brand names”